

Mr. Vilović (Croatia): Mr. President, at the outset I wish to thank you and the Turkish presidency for organizing this debate on the protection of civilians during armed conflict. I would also like to thank Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes for his important briefing.

Croatia aligns itself with the statement of the European Union to be delivered later by the representative of the Czech Republic. I should like here to make some specific points.

Battles of the past were largely conducted on battle fields. The middle of the last century marked a turning point in the nature of contemporary conflict, especially as it relates to civilians. The last century witnessed such distressing phenomena as ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and genocide, for which we unfortunately have too many examples. These abhorrent practices, this new manner of waging war, are something that the international community must continue to address, for complacency in tackling this challenge may well equal complicity.

As a point of departure we would like to highlight once again the Geneva Conventions, which lie at the core of international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians. This Council has on numerous occasions reaffirmed its commitment to protect those most vulnerable in armed conflict and has repeatedly condemned systematic and widespread violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, most recently in our January debate on this very issue. The revised aide-memoire adopted at that time (S/PRST/2009/1, annex) provides valuable guidance for Council action, integrating the many different aspects of the protection of civilians.

There continues to be a humanitarian imperative that all States be bound by the very real need to reduce human costs in armed conflict, in particular the imperative to uphold the rights of civilians. The Council can and has pronounced itself on these issues and can impose targeted measures and individual sanctions against individuals responsible for grievous violations of humanitarian law and human rights.

Recent normative and methodological advancements have allowed us to increasingly bring to light the plight of women and children, especially young girls, in armed conflict, as well as to address certain types of weapons. Yet despite the advances made in implementing international humanitarian law and the work being done by a plethora of actors on these issues, Croatia is concerned by the heavy toll that civilians in many conflict areas around the world continue to bear. This year alone, our discussions on this subject have been held against the distressing backdrop of the suffering of civilians in such places as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gaza and the Sudan.

In situations where prevention has failed, national Governments need to be held accountable for arresting and prosecuting those who have committed grave crimes, as the primary responsibility for protecting civilians lies with the parties to an armed conflict. If Governments fail to investigate, prosecute and adequately punish violations of international humanitarian law committed by members of their own armed forces or committed on their territory, recourse to the International Criminal Court (ICC) can and should be considered. That is where the Security Council can play an important role, as it did by referring the situation in Darfur to the ICC.

Last year, at the open debate on the protection of civilians, Croatia called for more consistent attention from the Security Council on this issue. We have been pleased to find that, over the past year, important progress has been made. The Council agreed to negotiate the expansion of triggers in the area of children in armed conflicts and adopted resolution 1820 (2008) on sexual violence in armed conflict.

We look forward to the upcoming report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of resolution 1820 (2008). We also look forward to the issuance of the study undertaken by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations on how United Nations missions can contribute more to the protection of civilians. While we acknowledge that many peacekeeping operations have strong provisions in their mandates on the protection of civilians — which we salute — and often act in close cooperation with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNICEF and the

Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights on the ground, more attention needs to be given to the implementation of these provisions, including to possible lessons learned from a variety of situations.

Croatia is concerned about reported cases where Governments or armed groups are denying access to humanitarian assistance. Preventing food and other supplies from reaching civilians, especially children, desperately waiting for assistance has in many cases developed into another deplorable method of war. We strongly condemn attacks on humanitarian personnel and we urge all parties to conflict to ensure their safety.

When we talk about civilians in armed conflict, let us not forget that many of them have ended up with disabilities, both physical and psychological. We should intensify our efforts to help them live a dignified life, especially during the delicate time of post-conflict peacebuilding.

We are on a good path towards addressing the many challenges that still lie ahead of us. We have a good basis and practice on which we can build, including on how to be more systematic in our approaches to protection issues. When we make decisions and adopt resolutions in this Council, we should therefore also ask ourselves what impact they will have on civilians on the ground. Let us use the power we have in order to be advocates for those who have no voice. In the end, that is the best legacy we can leave both for them and ourselves.